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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000681

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: INEC UNREADY AS BUHARI AND OBASANJO
CONTEST IN CLOSE RACE IN BENUE

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER; REASONS 1.5
(B) AND (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: POLOFF visited local party officials, domestic and international election monitors, academics, and local INEC officials during an April 3-4 trip to Benue State. Most believed violence is likely if electoral manipulation is obvious. Only a few people believed INEC is prepared for the election. Conversations confirmed that President Obasanjo is still highly unpopular among significant numbers of the Tiv, Benue's largest and one of Nigeria's biggest, ethnic groups, because of the October 2001 massacre of over 200 civilians at Zaki-Biam. Obasanjo may win Benue, but his victory is not assured. Despite his recent illness and convalescence in Europe, PDP Governor George Akume is likely to be reelected. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) On April 4, POLOFF paid an unannounced visit to the Makurdi INEC headquarters. The lack of activity at the office was surprising considering less than a week remained before the National Assembly election. Nevertheless, INEC officials claimed they were ready and they did not expect problems on election day. POLOFF noted 20 cardboard boxes of election materials drying in the sun after being soaked in the previous night's rain. The INEC administrative officer explained that these were pamphlets and other "non-sensitive" materials. He said the actual ballots and other tamper prone items were under lock and key at the Central Bank branch and would be delivered to polling places on the morning of the election. Despite the poor condition of their vehicular "fleet," the INEC officials expected to have no trouble delivering the ballots on time so that the polls could open as scheduled.

3. (C) INEC's optimism was extreme, but not infectious. Most other interlocutors were pessimistic. Opposition party members and election monitors worried that rigging in certain Local Government Areas (LGAs) (specifically, Kwande, Katsina-Ala, Tarka and Gboko) would spark violence. Both Nigerian and international election monitors worried that the governing Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) would attempt to manipulate the vote in the ANPP or UNPP strongholds within the state.

4. (C) Conversations with Tiv, Jukun and Idoma politicians, election monitors, and academics revealed that President Obasanjo remains unpopular among the populous Tiv because of the October 2001 Zaki-Biam massacre. The Tiv blame Minister of Defense T.Y. Danjuma, a Jukun, for Zaki-Biam. By extension, they blame Obasanjo. The comment "a vote for Obasanjo is a vote for Danjuma" was made often. Former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. (Ret.) Victor Malu, whose home was burned and relatives killed during the violence at Zaki-Biam, been campaigning against Obasanjo.

5. (C) Although from a different ethnic group in another state, Vice President Atiku was given an important traditional honorary title by the Tiv and enjoys wide popularity, however, his positive standing is insufficient to diminish Tiv anger. While Obasanjo may yet win in Benue, he cannot count on a large margin. He will have to win significant Tiv votes, then count on the Jukun and Idoma to carry him. With PDP National Chairman Audu Ogbeh being Idoma, Obasanjo will count on strong support from that quarter.

6. (C) On the other hand, ANPP Presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari has encountered some friction from the prickly Tivs. When he attempted to campaign in Benue a few months ago, some Tiv leaders cautioned him to bypass the state. They said many Tivs were angered when stones were thrown at Vice President Atiku's

motorcade at an event in Kano late last year. They blamed Buhari supporters for Atiku's rough treatment and warned Buhari might get similar treatment if he came to Benue.

17. (C) The gubernatorial race features the incumbent George Akume (PDP) and challengers Paul Urongo (ANPP) and Mike Mku (UNPP). Despite his recent illness and convalescence in Europe, Akume is likely to hang on to his position in a close race with Urongo.

18. (C) COMMENT: The problems INEC faces in Benue are not unique. Few outside INEC's own offices believe its administrators and its newly trained poll workers are prepared for the elections. Obasanjo will be in a competitive battle with Buhari to capture this populous state. Obasanjo will hope that the antagonistic Tiv will stay home rather than vote for Buhari. If so, Obasanjo's assured support among the Idoma and Jukun should write his ticket. END COMMENT.

JETER